

# The Angel Gabriel according to Luke 1

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In the New Testament, (as, by the way, also in the Old Testament),<sup>1</sup> the angel Gabriel is mentioned only twice. Two consecutive narratives (Luke 1:5-25 and 1:26-28) describe him as a messenger of God who announces the birth of a child. He is not introduced. Because in 2:9-10,13 Luke leaves the angel, that brings God's message to the shepherds, unnamed (and does not call him Gabriel), we must assume that it was not the author of the third Gospel who put the name of God's messenger into his text, but adopted it from the tradition available to him. Those, however, who created the traditions in the background of the Lukan childhood story (or at least of one of the two stories mentioned) must have had a certain idea of the angel Gabriel.

It is therefore our task to find out what the addressees of the original, probably preliterate narratives knew about the angel Gabriel (1). Then, we will consider both narratives separately (2) and, finally, we will try to describe whether (and how) the image of the angel Gabriel has been altered in the process of transmission (3).

## 1. Gabriel in Early Judaism

Sources from the context of the New Testament do not tell us very much about the angel Gabriel.<sup>2</sup> So it is quite probable that oral and lost written traditions of ancient Judaism originally had a much more elaborate image of this figure than the sources available today say. What they tell us about Gabriel can be summarized in a few sentences:

1.1 In the book of Daniel (Dan 8:16 and 9:21) Gabriel appears as the angel who interprets Daniel's vision of the end of times. Insofar as these visions are concerned with future historical events, he has the same function as the unnamed *angelus interpretis* of Zechariah's vision (Zech 1:9-12,14). The annotation that Gabriel appears to Daniel during

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1 Dan 8:16; 9:21.

2 Sänger, Γαβριήλ 554, states that „die Apokalyptiker in der zwischentestamentlichen Lit.(eratur) auch an G.(abriel) großes Interesse (zeigen)“. This is, however, a bit exaggerated.

the time of prayer at the evening sacrifice (9:21) had its effects on the Lukan story (see below).

1.2 In early Jewish literature outside the Old Testament Gabriel is mentioned as part of a group of archangels, mostly four (1En 10:9; 40:9; 54:6; 71:8-9; 1QM 9:15-16), but sometimes more (grApcEsr 6:2). These archangels belong to God's entourage, to his special delegates.

1.2.1 Gabriel is one of four angels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, who are active at the Flood and eliminate sinful humanity (1 Enoch 9). They appear as commissioned to exercise punishment (1En 10:9, 54:6).

1.2.2 Furthermore he is mentioned in another a group of four – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Sariel – who are considered to help in the battle against "the sons of darkness". Here he is seen as a decisive power (1QM 9:15-16).

1.2.3 Together with Michael, Raphael and Uriel he appears as a helper at the occasion of Adam's burial (ApcMos 40).

1.2.4 According to 2En 21:5 he raises Enoch to the seventh heaven (2En 21:5).

1.2.5 As an advocate of the inhabitants of the earth (1En 40:6) as any time he is sent on a commission by God, he stands in front of God, as Enoch does according to 2En 21:5. Later on it says that Enoch comes to stand on God's left, near Gabriel (24:1), which, of course, to indicate that Gabriel's usual place is also on God's left.<sup>3</sup>

1.2.6 Gabriel is characterised as "set over all exercise of strength" (1En 40:9) – probably a reference to his name which can be translated as "God's strong hero"<sup>4</sup> or "God has shown his strength"<sup>5</sup>. Probably the first translation is to be preferred.

1.2.7 According to 1En 71:8-9 he is God's companion at Enoch's nomination as "Son of Man" (1En 71:8-9).

All these facets lead to a relatively unified picture: Gabriel belongs to the innermost circle of angels around God, the ones, who accompany him in his activities and who are commissioned by him to special services. They mainly play a role in the great events of primeval times, when Enoch lived and Gabriel was in charge of the paradise (1En 20:7), and in the end of times, in the battle of the "sons of light" against the "sons of darkness" (1QM 9:15-16).

From this picture, however, one cannot derive the angel's function as an announcer of Jesus' and the Baptist's birth. There are only few

3 Bousset, Religion 328, suggests that he „sits“ at God's left side.

4 Cf. Uhlig, Henochbuch 581 n. 6c. Comparable also Fitzmyer, Gospel 328: „God is my hero / warrior“.

5 Cf. Brown, Birth 262: „God has shown himself strong.“

comparable details in Luke 1 and Dan 8-9, the other texts mentioned above do not suit as parallels. So the fact that Luke 1 calls the angel's name Gabriel could be seen as pure coincidence – perhaps the main reason for this was the desire to name the heavenly figure proclaiming Johns and Jesus' birth. To this end the "Lord of the powers" (1En 40:9) of course suited excellently.

If we now look into both New Testament texts where Gabriel plays a role, a superficial comparison allows to state the following points: In both texts God's messenger transmits a message proclaiming the birth of a child – in the first case the birth of the Baptist (1:5-25), in the second case Jesus' birth. Both texts, however, show clear differences regarding both the angels' words and their framework. They thus have to be examined separately:

## 2. Gabriel in Luke's Childhood Story

### 2.1 The Announcement of the Baptist's Birth

This account says that Gabriel is sent to the priest Zechariah during he is sacrificing in the temple (Luke 1:10). The angel thus appears in a moment when the priest is completely dedicated to his service of God. This can be compared to Dan 9:21 where the appearance takes place at the time of the evening sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> One can assume that the tradition had a detailed knowledge of the book of Daniel.<sup>7</sup> The angel occupies a place on the right of the altar, a detail that can be compared to the Christian tradition according to which Jesus sits on God's right side.<sup>8</sup> The text wants to say: When Gabriel speaks to human beings, he is God's chief-executive. When he says that he stands or stood in front of God (Luke 1:19),<sup>9</sup> he relates to the moment when he was commissioned with the task he now is about to execute.

The message to the priest Zechariah proclaims the birth of a new Elijah<sup>10</sup> who will prepare God's coming to this earth (1:17). Although Old Testament and early Jewish parallels can also speak about the

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6 Bovon, *Evangelium* 54 n.50, considers also the time of morning sacrifice as possible.

7 For more possible parallels between Luke 1:5-25 and Dan 8-10 cf. Nolland, *Luke* I 29.

8 Mark 14:62 parr.; Acts 2:33; 5:21; Rom 8:34 et al.

9 Παρεστηκώς is a Perfect participle.

10 Luke 1:17 states, that he will behave „with the spirit and power of Elijah“ and fulfill the prophesy of Mal 3:23 which tells that the coming Elijah „will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents“.

proclamation of a birth preparing God's coming,<sup>11</sup> the angel remains unnamed in these cases. The idea that this proclamation is made by the archangel Gabriel is thus unparalleled. Furthermore we usually do not find such a detailed description of the announced person's course of life. One might consider whether an earlier version of the story just mentioned an unnamed angel – but this remains speculation.

Undoubtedly Zechariah's demanding of a sign is also unparalleled in the Old Testament and in early Judaism. According to Isaiah 7:14 the proclamation of the child's birth itself is a sign which can be proven at the event. The demand of a sign usually belongs to call narratives like Exod 3-4 or Judg 6:14-24.<sup>12</sup> It remains unclear thus why Zechariah demands this sign, when he will be able to recognize within weeks whether his wife is pregnant. In the present context Zechariah's expectation can only mean that he demands a sign making clear that his child is in fact "God's precursor" (Luke 1:17). The actual wording of his request, however, unambiguously points to the possibility of the birth (see Luke 1:18).

Gabriel's answer, pointing to a miracle of punishment, which happens at once, is just as unusual as Zechariah's request. It has its parallel in Acts 5:1-10; 13:11<sup>13</sup> but contrary to Acts 13:11 it is not simultaneously a sign. The development of the story, however, will show that Zechariah's dumbness has its own function, which is not clear from the beginning. He must be unable to communicate verbally with Elisabeth, that she can mention the name, which Zechariah had received from the angel, independently. It is not said, but implicitly stated that Elisabeth is not able to read, while otherwise Zechariah could have communicated with her by writing, as he later, after the birth, does with the relatives (Luke 1:63).

All this suggests that the account originally functioned as a story from the disciples of the Baptist zu legitimate<sup>14</sup> their scholar,<sup>15</sup> but was

11 The closest parallel is PsPhilo, LAB 42:1-3: a) statement of a childless marriage; b) appearance of an angel; c) proclamation of a birth; d) instruction regarding the name of the child. Within the Bible Matt 1:18-25 can be compared: appearance of an angel, birth and naming (cf. Wiefel, *Evangelium* 51). See also Judg 13, with the elements childless marriage, appearance of an angel and proclamation of birth. Cf. also Isa 7:14; Gen 18 and 1Sam 1. Form-critically we have an account of a miraculous birth of a man of God. Furthermore Judg 13 has two other, less important elements: the notice that neither wine nor alcohols is drunken (Judg 13:4,7,14), and the remark that the child will grow up with God's blessing (Judg 13:24, cf. Luke 1:80).

12 Cf. Radl, *Evangelium* 44.

13 The language of Acts 13:11 and Luke 1:20 are parallel: καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ ... ἔση σιωπῶν τυφλός ... μή + part.

14 For more information see Klein, *Legitimation* 85-93.

altered in the course of transmission. One can only speculate about its original form.<sup>16</sup> However, what can be said, is:

The original version of the story probably contained the introduction, which states that both Elisabeth and Zechariah stem from priestly circles and thus attributes a Sadducean ideal to them. This introduction also characterised them as “devout and righteous” according to Pharisaic claims. This version also contained the appearance of an angel. The fact that he occurs in the setting of a sacrifice can be seen in the light of Dan 8-9. The proclamation that the child to be born will abstain from wine and fermented drinks, which recalls the Simson story (Judg 13:14), also belonged to the original version. Judg 13 is also an important intertext for the description of the Baptist’s later conduct. The original story probably also contained a note that the old couple had prayed for the birth of a child. V.13 seems to presuppose this, but this is described extensively in 1Sam 1. So the original narrative also has been shortened, perhaps by Luke himself.<sup>17</sup>

In the original passage following the angel’s word Zechariah might have stayed dumb like Ezekiel did according to Ez 3:26 – which would not be intended as a punishment-miracle. Instead, the story wanted to assure that Zechariah could not communicate the proclamation of the name to Elisabeth. If Ezekiel 3:26 in fact formed the background of the original account, then it probably wanted to indicate a time of God’s silence, which, however, only endures until the birth of the Baptist. In this case, the original story like Judg 13 also contained an appearance of Gabriel to Elisabeth – or Elisabeth chose the name John, “God is merciful”, as a recognition that God had listened to her prayers.

However it may be: In an earlier version of the account, Gabriel played a role very different to the one which we know from the Jewish context of its time. The one who is usually described as saviour of his followers also punishing all evil (1En 9; 1QM 9:15-16), the “Lord of powers” (1En 40:9) and the interpreter of end time visions (Dan 8-9) is described here as God’s special delegate who announces the birth of the herald of God’s coming to earth, the eschatological prophet. Like the angel appearing in Judg 13, Gabriel is thus presented with characteristics of later Old Testament prophets. Using biblical language he predicts a coming event. He is no longer an *angelus interpres* like in Dan

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15 Regarding the disciples of the Baptist cf. Acts 19:1-7. For more information see Backhaus, Jüngerkreise.

16 Radl, Ursprung 86-139, tries to do this nevertheless.

17 A similar case can be found in Acts 10:4 where God’s voice proclaims that Cornelius’ prayers and alms, which are not mentioned before have ascended as a memorial before God.

8-9, his partner in dialogue no longer experiences heavenly events as heralds of earthly ones, but stays on earth, and the archangel brings him God's clear message without any heavenly vision.

Probably in the next layer, but still within the pre-Lukan tradition, the demand for a sign has been added. This motif usually belongs to stories about the call of a prophet, but is changed here to the announcement of the prophet's birth. Most likely, however, it was Luke himself who interpreted Zechariah's dumbness as a punishment-miracle and thereby created an analogy between the archangel and the apostles Peter (Acts 5:4-10) and Paul (Acts 13:9-11).<sup>18</sup> In this process the fact that angels stand in front of God, when they receive instructions, is applied to Gabriel, who thereby confirms his power.

With this the early Jewish apocalyptic traditions about Gabriel have been changed significantly. Now Gabriel is described as God's mighty messenger proclaiming the beginning of salvation in the birth of John the Baptist.

## 2.2. Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth (Luke 1:26-38)

Luke 1:26-38 goes even further in restraining apocalyptic elements. The birth of the Son of God descending from David to rule forever is announced. Contrary to Dan 9:21 Gabriel does not appear at the time of the evening sacrifice, and contrary to Luke 1:17 he does not announce a herald of God's eschatological coming. But like the angel that came to Simson's mother (Judg 13:3) he visits Mary. Like Gabriel's appearance as *angelus interpres* according to Dan 9 his appearance is not frightful.<sup>19</sup> He addresses Mary like a human messenger and does not vanish in fire as in Judg 13:20. Rather, he leaves the room and departs like a human being (Luke 1:38) after having fulfilled his task. Without being criticised Mary is allowed to ask a question if she understood him correctly. She

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18 The passage shows many „Lukanisms“ which show how much Luke himself has shaped the story. For this see Klein, *Lukasevangelium* 85 n.23. There are, however, fewer Lukanisms in the angel's words which is an argument against the thesis of Busse, *Evangelium* 172, and Kampling, *Herr* 163, who suggest that V.13-17 were created by the evangelist himself. Luke treats *logia* in a very careful manner. Cf. Dibelius, *Formgeschichte* 31. It is not possible to establish longer Lukan additions with certainty. Radl, *Ursprung* 103, deletes V.18-20 and suggests that Zechariah's dumbness has to do with his meeting the angel.

19 This, however, happens again according to the tradition at the appearance of the angel before the shepherds at Jesus' birth (Luke 2:9).

obviously behaves correctly by allowing God to work upon her (Luke 1:38).

Gabriel's attributions again receive new accents in this account. The dialogue can be divided into three parts: a) V.28-29; b) V.30-33; c) V.34-38a, it is framed by an introduction V.26-27 and a conclusion V.38. The angel's longer speech (V.30-33) forms the centre of the scene. It consists of twice five sentences,<sup>20</sup> which create a unity. The sentences of the first part are shorter, in the second part they are longer and therefore more important.<sup>21</sup> The syntax is semiticizing: All sentences – with one exception in V.30, where a γάρ is found – are connected by καί. The ideas found here correspond to Old Testament-Jewish expectations<sup>22</sup> and develop Judg 13:3. The text announces the birth of the Meassiah who will reign forever as God's son on David's throne (1:32). Gabriel is seen as the messenger proclaiming the fulfillment of Messianic expectations. Luke 1:35-38, however, which is designed as an explanation of V.32-33, no longer deals with the birth of the Messiah but with the question how God's Son comes into existence by the work of the Spirit. This statement is rooted in Hellenistic Jewish Christianity,<sup>23</sup> but is probably pre-Lukan.<sup>24</sup> Gabriel is here not only seen as knowing the coming eschatological events, which are laid down in heaven already, he is also the one who knows about the heavenly events concerning the Spirit. It is known to him that God's spirit will come upon Mary like a shadow, like God coming in the clouds (Exod 40:43). Still more, he will penetrate her like oil penetrates the body. Through this the Son of God will come

20 Cf. Jeremias, *Sprache* 48-49.

21 Hahn, *Hoheitstitel* 247, reduces this unit to 1:32-33, a passage, which, however, seems not conceivable without a narrative frame.

22 Originally we have an oracle of Semitic origin promising the birth of a son. For this cf. Gese, *Natus ex virgine* 113, who points to Judg 13 and Gen 17:18. The titles „Son of David“ and „Son of God“ are seen together as in 2Sam 7:12 and Isa 9:5-6. Cf. Ernst, *Lukas* 70. The angel's proclamation has linguistic parallels to Isa 7:14, as Brown, *Birth* 305 and Schneider, *Lukas* 48, have seen. As Son of David the proclaimed Son of God is heavenly king of Israel, but not yet Saviour as in 2:11.

23 Regarding the Hellenized idea of a birth by the Spirit cf. Norden, *Geburt* 81; Brunner-Traut, *Geburtsgeschichte* 105.

24 Spitta, *Notizen* 289, regarded this as a "Zusatz des Herausgebers des Evangeliums." Gewiss, *Marienfrage* 1:34-35, 251-254, argued that V.34 goes back to Luke himself. Zmijewski, *Mutter* 91, agrees with him. Lohfink, *Himmelfahrt* 154-57, and Weiser, *Apostelgeschichte* 51, regard Mary's question as a typical Lukanism. For Lukan origin see also Schneider, *Luke* 1,34-35 255-259. Dibelius, *Jungfrauensohn* 17-19, and Lattke, *Lukas* 1 68, regard the text as uniform, Lattke regards only V.34 as redactional. πῶς + future and ἐπεὶ, however, are not Lukan. Cf. Nolland, *Luke* I 52, who argues, that V.34-35 are pre-Lukan.

into existence, who will not need a father for his birth, but merely a mother. Moreover, it is significant that on this point in the tradition Mary is greeted with the Greek address *χαῖρε* and is called "blessed" *χαριτωμένη*, a wordplay thus, which is possible in Greek only. Friendliness and mercy are expressed in this way. The angel's conduct is that of a gentleman.

The shift from escatological-earthly to heavenly-spiritual events is clear and shows that Gabriel again is understood in a new manner. Gabriel is no longer the "strong hero", who can proclaim and act out a punishment-miracle, he brings the message of a spiritual event which he is able to explain clearly and convincingly after Mary's misunderstanding.

Within this explanation Mary even receives a sign consisting in the reference to Elisabeth's pregnancy.<sup>25</sup> And so Mary's reaction is one of humility (Luke 1:38).

The account thus describes Gabriel as the herald of the coming Christ and the dawn of salvation. He does not interpret eschatological events any more, but brings the Gospel of the expected birth of God's son. Gabriel knows of God's mysteries, i.e., his plan of salvation, as the early Christian prophets do (Eph 3:4-5), and like the early Christian apostles and prophets do not only proclaim Christ and God's plan of salvation, but explain it, Gabriel, too, responds to Mary's question. With Gabriel's figure early Christian missionaries and prophets can identify.

As a kind of appendix it can be added that the third evangelist presumably interpreted the angel accompanied by heavenly hosts in the story of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:9) as Gabriel, too. Again, he proclaims the Christian message with its contemporary relevance and points to a sign which can help the addressed persons to believe.

### 3. Conclusion

In Luke 1 the angel Gabriel very clearly adopts the characteristics of Christian apostles and prophets who know of "God's mystery" (Eph 3:4-5), his plan of salvation. Accordingly he proclaims the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, and describes both in a manner, as Christian tradition does: a) John as an ascete who does not drink wine and alcoholic drinks, who precedes the Lord, now Christ, and ends the fight between

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25 Possibly the note regarding Elisabeth (V.36-37) was created by Luke himself as already Harnack, *Zu Lc 1* 53-57, n.1 suggested. This, however, cannot be proven.



the generations as already Mal 3:23 had prophesied, and b) Jesus who as Son of God and Son of David reigns in eternity, and is born through the work of the Holy Spirit. Like a Man of God in the New Testament Gabriel can execute miracles of punishment where his mission by God is doubted. But he also can – like a wise man – explain his message to Mary who, afterwards, declares her willingness.

The change in the role of the angel becomes even clearer, if one considers the fact, that according to Luke human beings are not transported to heaven where they receive an interpretation of their visions by an angel. Moreover, angels come to earth to visit humans beings and reveal to them God's message. That's why the angels – among them Gabriel – are described in more human terms. Within Old Testament tradition Gabriel bears the characteristics of an epiphany angel who proclaims the birth of a saviour. Hellenistic Jewish Christianity takes over this idea, but completes it with a spiritual vision of God's Son and thus emphasizes – in its description of Gabriel – the spiritual dimension of God.

With the Hellenization of the tradition the story of the announcement of Jesus' birth (Luke 1:26-38) is filled with charm. This creates the description of the angel's different behaviour against a man and a woman. In the Mary scene no dissonance between the angel and the humble virgin can be found. In the contrast, the angel does not react sympathetically to Zechariah's question. One has the impression that he feels questioned by the priest, and therefore emphasises his authority and punishes Zechariah. However, the angel greets Mary courteously and responds to her question with an explanation. The angel is thus described like a human being who treats men and women differently. Perhaps this is an expression of a gender specific treatment of men and women in early Christian mission or prophetic teaching.

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